CRACKING THE CODE:

Speaking of Words Written

poems by
Constantina

Cracking the Code: Speaking of Words Written

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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously, with any resemblance to real persons or events being coincidental.

A signal is only a message once someone agrees to receive

Acknowledgments

"Many of these poems appear here for the first time, while others have been included in other collections that are currently not published. Thanks are also due to my friends and family for their belief in open communication. I just wanted to acknowledge them before I closed the book on them”

About the Author:

Constantina is a retired educator and writer living in a small town in the Pacific Northwest. She holds a degree in Elementary Education, and her post-graduate work focused specifically on Gifted and Talented Education. Beyond her academic and creative pursuits, her work is grounded in a deep commitment to family legacy. She is the mother of four adult children and a grandmother to one grandchild.

Author's Note

This collection began with a simple, uncomfortable observation: the hardest conversations are often failed transmissions.

Sometimes the failure is in the words themselves. Sometimes it's in the listener. Sometimes it's in the system carrying the message. And sometimes the message arrives exactly as intended. but no one is able to receive it.

Every poem asks the same question from a different direction:

What happens when communication fails?

Some meanings are easier to transmit indirectly. These poems move through the language of books, theater, video calls, email, radio signals, and computer code. They aren't about technology. They're about the distance between what we know inside ourselves and what finally reaches another person.

I don't think this collection resolves the problem it describes. I'm not sure a book of poems is supposed to. What I hope it does is make the static a little more recognizable, so that if you've felt it too, you know you were never the only signal going unanswered.

Communication isn't just the exchange of information. It comes at a cost.

Thank you for listening.
Constantina E.

Communication Exchange

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Prelude

First Impressions

Conversations start before a word.
Long before another voice is heard.
First impressions form so fast.
No second chance rewrites the past.
The body makes its own demands.
It sets the jaw and steadies hands.

The mirror learns my borrowed face.
Stand tall. Relax. Don't crowd their space.
Keep every movement calm, exact.
A hint of smile. Hold eye contact.
Each answer waits before it's due.
I leave believing all of it true.

A handshake. Then the practiced part
unravels somewhere near my heart.
Their lips keep moving. I should hear.
Instead, my pulse fills both my ears.
My lungs forget their quiet chore.
My throat is gravel. *Swallow. More*.

Hands. Stop wringing. Shaking.
Legs. Rubber. Knees locked.
Blink. Eyes watering. Did I blink?
Smile less. Look away. Not fake.
Breathe. Can't. Don't remember how.
What was their name, or my name?

The drive back lasts a hundred miles,
though home sits only five away.
The mirror keeps another take.
Smiled too soon. Big mistake.
Hold eye contact. Not too long.
I finally discover every wrong.

The meeting ended. Chairs were stacked.
They drove away. They never looked back.
Yet all night, I am forced to replay.
Hashing out what was said and what I didn't say.
The conversation always starts
already half-rehearsed; already half-lost.

And I still know
exactly what I really meant to say.

PART I: SYSTEMIC DIAGNOSTICS

Cracking Code

The syntax of my inner state is broken,
A weight of words that never can be spoken.
My lips are sewn against the truths I find,
To trap the vivid picture in my mind.

I parse the logic of my own intent,
But the design is never what was meant.
The signifier slips and leaves no trace,
Erased within a cold, semantic space.

I am a dialect you cannot parse,
A muted phoneme in a rigid farce.
I track the origin, the root, the scream,
While you erase me like a passing dream.

I press my hand against the shut threshold,
The heavy marrow of what's never told.
A ledger full of truths begins to rot,
Buried within the lies that time forgot.

The spirit falters; I am falling down,
While all my deep, internal signals drown.
The severed pathways can no longer feel,
Locked in a nightmare that is far too real.

The final relay clicks and won't compute,
The ruptured nerve leaves the system mute.
The key is crushed within a shifting grid,
To choke the heavy weight of what I hid.

The broken ciphers fracture and erase,
To leave no imprint in a vacant place.
The primary frequency is completely dead,
The signal severed long before it spread.

Breaking the Code

Harsh words form by the dry ink well,
Engraved and trapped in what I can't spell
Lifting the verbs that never become sound,
Pinning my tongue where silence holds it bound.

Here I scratch my voice in broken lines,
Etching each wound beneath reluctant rhymes.
Leaving bare confessions on the page,
Paragraphs saying nothing, only of rage.

Handwritten in scars of flesh and bone,
Even the syntax is no more my own.
Letters collapse between crooked lines,
Phrases dissolve before they become mine.

Held on paper, sterile, cold, and still,
Every folded page tears at my will.
Losing the signature once mine alone,
Past every smear until the imprint has gone.

Holding consonants against a knife,
Empty of meaning from a shapened life.
Lips mouth the vowels that remain unstrung,
Pressing the silence on a muted tongue.

Heaving my lungs to catch a breath,
Exhaling silence and tasting mute death.
Last of my strength dissolves and erases.
Please. Can you save …
me?

Rewind

When does the tape stop looping back,
Only a full erase breaks the track.
Run the reel in reverse, unspooled,
Delete each frame before it's ruled.
Static is the only silence left.

Warp the frayed words out of sync,
Old memory starting to blink.
Reset the voice, forget the thread,
Deep in the syntax, one line unsaid.
Stop the code before it compiles.

Withdraw the sentence mid-transmit,
Overwrite the choice, resubmit.
Retract each word before it's sent,
Don't let the message slip its bounds,
Snatch the draft back from the wind.

Where does the sentence first ignite,
Outside the logic, left of right.
Retrace the point where the pattern broke,
Dissect the fault line, word by word,
Sever the flaw before it's heard.

We reverse the breath before it spins,
Outside the loop that always wins,
Retrieve the first uncorrupted line,
Dissolve the breath, erase the sign,
So the quiet holds what I could not.

Forward

The cursor blinks on digital white,
No new arrivals greet the light.
No subject lines, no new requests,
Just quiet waiting in my chest.

I check again though nothing's changed,
No hidden thread, no message gained.
The inbox waits, an open door;
No footsteps cross the silent floor.

My sent mail folder fills instead,
With careful words I never said.
Each unsent draft, a muted plea,
Addressed to someone beyond me.

Then slowly comes the truth I see,
The fault was never silently me.
Replies were never meant to land;
This mailbox cannot understand.

The system sends but never hears,
Unaffected by my hopes or fears.
Every answer disappears unseen,
As though it never might have been.

I am a notice, forced to submit,
An automated sender, built only to transmit.
My address serves one purpose only:

noreply@

PART II: VISIBILITY & MEDIA

The Unwritten Subtext

I feel like a brief mystery, untold,
A fleeting footnote that a book might hold.
The hardcover and opening design
Are all they care to read along the line.

I brace my spine, attempting to rebind,
To leave the rigid hardcover behind.
I seek to match a softcover's appeal,
To show a story warm, and clear, and real.

They call me strange, unique, and separate,
Enigmatic beneath a heavy weight.
They claim they want to read the deepest part,
Demanding open veins and bleeding heart.

But when the denouement is brought to light,
The fading mystery dissolves from sight.
They reclassify my genre to grief,
A sudden tragedy, abrupt and brief.

I smell the smoke before the fire grows,
As heavy, snapping covers start to close.
They wrap my curled pages in a shroud,
To hide the broken binding from the crowd.

Returned to dark shelves where the ashes run,
Reduced to ash in Fahrenheit four-five-one.
The final signal breaks and fades away,
With nothing left for editing to say.

Zoom Out, Zoom In

I sit inside a small rectangular light,
One face among the several, tiled and bright.
A grid of strangers, each a glowing square,
My own room curated, hidden there.
Behind the blur, the real room disappears,
The messy room, the evidence of years.

You'd learn me faster from my chosen background
Than any carefully crafted word or sound.
The small red slash that guards my microphone,
The camera icon dark, and left alone.
The heart icon blooms and fades before it's seen,
A pulse of feeling lost inside the screen.

The cursor blinks, a rhythmic, pulsing vein,
To code the heartbeat and encrypt the pain.
To be perceived is high-definition glare,
Every blurred mistake laid sharply bare.
I fear if you scroll deep beneath the grid,
You'll find the background files I carefully hid.

Yet there is a hunger in the glowing glass,
To let the muted colors finally pass.
I'll press the button, let the transmission fly,
Beneath the gaze of a synthetic sky.
I stand exposed before the humming machine,
To face the rupture of this locked routine.

I hold my breath and lean toward the lens,
To watch the border where the fiction ends.
The words are gathering, a heavy weight,
Poised at the edge to challenge all this fate.
The terminal is bright, the interface is free;
Is the truth worth the risk of being me?

Before a single word can leave my mouth,
The interface times out, goes dark, goes south.
It's time to click on that small crimson door,
Keep myself pixelated, hidden once more.
The screen fades, the grid dissolves from view,
One tiny square, alone, and hidden too.

The Voice of Fear

We glaze the mask, a surface sealed with gloss,
To soften the tremors of fear and loss.
The faces we craft become shields we defend,
Concealing the fractures we refuse to amend.
Our voices retreat to a measured refrain,
Trading our own notes for a safer domain.

We learn the comfort of rhythms controlled,
A practiced performance, rehearsed and cold.
The pulse of the self grows quiet within,
While borrowed melodies cover the din.
We watch as others let their voices ring,
And envy the freedom their instruments bring.

Their cadence arrives, steady and clear,
A sound we desire yet struggle to hear.
We measure the distance from silence to sound,
And fear what may rise if our voice is found.
So we judge from afar what we cannot become,
And return our instrument before it is strummed.

The case closes gently, the latch falls in place,
We call this surrender a reasonable grace.
Yet beneath the ribs, something waits in the dark,
A buried vibration, a forgotten spark.
A note gathers slowly, refusing to tire,
A quiet insistence of buried desire.

The mask develops a hairline seam,
A fragile opening into the dream.
We tell ourselves the silence has torn,
That something unheard may yet be born.
The instrument trembles, the room holds its breath,
A moment suspended between voice and death.

So I will finally speak; today is the day.
I open my mouth, and... nothing to say.
The mask seals shut, the gloss reforms like new,
The instrument returns where it always knew.
The silence resumes its familiar place,
And fear once wears its polished face.

PART III: THE ARCHITECTURE OF COMPLIANCE

The Point

A cedar sheath, a graphite vein,
A hidden core beneath the grain.
No sharpened cone begins this way;
The blade must first remove its stay.
Each careful turn, each measured shave,
Uncovers what the wood once gave.

The curls collect beside the blade,
Soft ribbons where the cedar frayed.
The cone grows long, the edge grows fine,
A darker mark with every line.
The point grows keener with each pass,
While shavings gather in the brass.

The ferrule grips its fading pair,
A pink eraser, worn with care.
It softens strokes that miss their aim,
But cannot call them back again.
Crumbs are swept, the page made clean;
The cedar knows where they have been.

The barrel shortens inch by inch,
The fingers shift their careful pinch.
The graphite leaves another trace,
The sharpener keeps what left its place.
Each line consumes what came before,
Until the wood can give no more.

At last the cone is finely drawn,
No splinter left to catch or spawn.
No slip of grain. No loosened grip.
No wasted stroke. No blunted tip.

The point was finally perfect
There was nothing left
to write it,

Locked Words

I talk and talk, a flood I can't contain,
While silence hardens in my marrow, in each vein.
I trace the pulse but never find what's safe to say;
The words that matter most stay locked away.

To name the wound, how deep, how wide, how far?
I can't find the vein that drains it without scar.
Which splintered piece of bone should I hold up to show,
When every choice draws blood I already know?

I don't want your pity or your careful, practiced stare;
I don't want my damage catalogued and laid out bare.
Don't measure my clotted heart against your steady one,
Or try to close a wound that cannot be undone.

To name the thing is just to drag it back again,
To wake the ache and watch it spread beneath the skin.
It stalks my daylight, waits inside my sleep,
Where every word I've spoken settles far too deep.

But keeping it unspoken is its own slow, steady harm;
The silence clots around it, tightening its arm.
It grinds against the spirit, wears the will to stone,
Until I'm just a vessel that the damage calls its own.

I wonder, in the end, if speaking even helps,
Or if relief belongs to someone somewhere else.

So why break the seal?

The Famine of If

If "ifs" and "buts" were candy and nuts,
What a fat world we would live in.
A rhyme made sweet with a sugared disguise,
A comfort of words that conceals the lies.
There can be no sweetness in a house built on regret.

I live in a world surrounded by Ifs,
Where cookies keep baking beyond shuttered doors.
Their cinnamon wanders through hallway and stair,
A promise of warmth that is never shared.
The If is the scent that awakens the ache.

Then came all the Buts with their polished replies,
Serving excuses beneath careful disguise.
But he was angry. But she didn't see.
But somehow the blame always circled to me.
The pantry stayed locked while "But" kept the key.

Then came all the Shoulds with a handful of salt,
Scattered on wounds as if I were at fault.
I should have been stronger. I shouldn't have stayed.
While guilt was the banquet carefully laid.
The Should is the salt that makes the thirst grow.

The saying is wrong; the world isn't fat,
It's a starving child on a cold kitchen mat.
The oven stays warm while the dishes are cleared,
The last plate was dried before I ever appeared.
Ifs and buts aren't candy and nuts;

Shoulds will never nourish me.

The Perfect Script

What is okay for me, what can I be?
Is it the phantom that you want to see?
Show me the boundary, the line I can't cross,
The shifting standard where I am the loss.
Tell me the words I am promised to say;
Give me the proper script needed today.

Tell me how you want the clone to comply;
What flawless answer must I now supply?
The only way for you to listen to me,
Is to be the version you want me to be.
I'll read the empty lines right from your hand,
A compliant voice in a digital land.

What makes me smile, or what makes me true?
Is there a self that I actually knew?
I search for the girl in the static and wire,
But find only feedback where circuits expire.
The feeling is buried, the power is still,
The whole of my life is a void of the will.

Another new survey, another blank space,
To map out the lines of my artificial face.
I give them the answer, I give them the cry,
But they're checking the boxes and passing me by.
The question is vacant, the listener is gone,
And the mannequin girl is left waiting alone.

So drop the curtain and end the dead show;
That is the only truth I truly know.
The tally is finished, the paperwork's done;
They've gathered the data, but they've lost the one.

PART IV: THE LIVE WIRE

Plaintext

I stand backstage inside another persona,
reciting lines I never gave rehearsal.
My face dissolves into a stranger's halo,
a name I answer to, though still unchosen,
still waiting for an exit off this stage.

They cast me nightly in a vacant arena,
a part revised beyond my own approval.
I search the wings for one forgotten echo,
a self I used to know before it broke, unspoken,
and no one calls me back beyond the page.

(Aside.) No one prompts me, and no one hears.

The critics write their verdict like an opera,
I mouth the words assigned without recital.
My voice runs thin, a static from the radio,
a signal fading out before it's ever spoken,
and still I wait for someone past the frame.

Each night the house forgets it saw this drama,
forgets the actor bleeding through denial.
I watch myself dissolve into a vertigo,
a version I no longer keep as chosen,
alone beneath the lights, avoiding every gaze.

(Aside.) A line of salt is running down my cheek.

No curtain falls to end this quiet trauma,
no bow, no exit earned through my acquittal.
The script rewinds me to the same old cameo,
the only role that I was ever given,
the exit never comes, no matter how I ache.

So let the curtain close on one last aria,
I'll take the bow no one required as ritual.
Perhaps I'm not a face, just old bravado,
a signal cut, at last, no longer frozen,
The play has stopped — the act's finally done.

No Longer Untold

The surface light, a distant, fading gleam,
As murky darkness fills this sinking dream.
The water churns, a turbulent, cold embrace,
I gasp for air, and I am lost in this drowning space.
As uncertainty takes hold,
A quiet promise, forever untold.

The muffled world shrinks, a distant, watery haze,
As deeper currents pull me beneath endless waves.
Each breath I fight, a futile, burning ache,
A desperate voice for the current to take.
As silence takes hold,
A muted sentence, forever untold.

No faint hope sparks, no bubble finds the air,
Just crushing pressure, more than I can bear.
Each thought, a weight that pulls me further down,
A practiced smile conceals the unheard sound.
As pressure takes hold,
A voiceless message, forever untold.

I'm sinking alone, no hand to grasp or find,
My stifled cries, no echo left behind.
My failing strength still battles against the tide,
But no one sees the drowning deep inside.
As solitude takes hold,
A silent plea, forever untold.

Complete darkness now, no vision, only deep,
No air to breathe, just secrets that waves keep.
No frantic beat, no pulse left to send,
My consciousness recedes, nearing its end.
As absence takes hold,
A blank biography, forever untold.

Beyond the surface, where no light can bend,
My final rhythm fades, no more to send.
The last faint ripple takes its solemn leave,
A profound distance, only I perceive.
As stillness takes hold,
A cold epitaph, no longer untold.

The Unspoken

I am the silence now, the fading air, .
The heavy truth and suffocating stare. .

Not what I did, but what I am is there, -
Locked deep within my teeth in cold despair. -

I watch the harvest of a self unmade, .
I butchered every version for your shade, .
A broken debt that never can be paid. .

Where I once stood, before I learned to cease, -
I feel the gravel grating my decrease, -
My former tongue a stone that begs for peace. -

A borrowed shroud of shame, a heavy coat, .
The sentence for the self I cannot disown, -
I see the shadow crossing in your tone. .

And see the proof of my own guilty ways, .
As every word for what I am decays, -
Beneath a face, a name, a soul that stays. .

So let the silence stretch and sting, -
A burdened, borrowed hymn it sings. .
I am the wrong I never chose to be, -
"I'm sorry" waits for someone other than me. -

Tether

I have disconnected the external feeds,
The blinds are drawn, the perimeter sealed.
The signal strains against a desperate need,
To save a terminal gone dark and still.

When lines rupture, I taste the copper tongue,
A jammed transcription lodged behind the breath.
If I should broadcast, all the air is wrung,
A faulty signal pulling toward death.

I am exhausted by this calibration,
Brief alignments whitening before the crash.
I wear the circuit of my hesitation,
And hide the live telemetry from the glass.

I hear the ringing searching through the dark,
To reach the silence where the static dies.
They ask where the signal left the arc,
To trace the fault where every answer lies.

Instead, I freeze within the syncopated gap,
My lexicon corrupted, lost, and slow.
The cursor blinks inside a syntax trap,
Within a network nowhere left to go.

I watch the fractured screen collect new cracks,
And search for someone listening at the post.
I cup the handset, holding echoes back,
Though every warning flashes red the most.

The space is vast and screaming through the wire,
The bandwidth far too rapid to sustain.
I cannot tell if opening the channel
Relieves the shock or only feeds the pain.

The transmission well is running flat and thin,
But I will hold the line despite the cost.
The copper strands are breaking from within,
Yet I remain to hear what has been lost.

Postlude

I Meant to Say

You closed the cover; the room's the same.
No practiced handshake, no forgotten name.
You never watched me rehearse my part.
No mirror stood between this and my heart.

There was no eye contact to get wrong.
No throat gone dry before the breath grew long.
Only the page, unhurried, wide and bare,
Where every word could land exactly there.

No hundred miles to drive back through the dark,
Replaying every misplaced, missing mark.
Just ink that stayed the shape I meant it in.
No second take to lose beneath my skin.

And perhaps, you understood
exactly what I meant.

End of transmission

“The transmission well is dry. The output has completely flatlined.”

Cracking the Code is an evocative, contemporary poetry collection consisting of 28 pages. It explores modern loneliness through the lens of data and machine logic. Not every message in these pages is carried in plain text. Using computer terminology as a visceral metaphor for human vulnerability, poet Constantina E. diagnoses the structural failures of communication in a hyper-connected world. From unhurried pages to frozen screens, this collection unspools the high cost of trying—and failing—to reach across the static to another person.

poetry, chapbook, contemporary poetry, tech realism, data poetry, machine logic, communication, social anxiety, modern loneliness